



# PILOT PROGRAM

*Proclaim Aviation becomes model for larger mission effort*

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WORTHINGTON — When Cameron Johnson's parents wanted to go to town, they had a long road ahead of them. His parents, missionaries in Liberia for 20 years, had 350 miles of difficult, often impassable, dirt roads on their way to the nearest big city for supplies, medical aid and visits to The Institute for Liberian Languages. The adventure usually took them anywhere from one to three days — one way.

When aviation service became available for the missionaries of Liberia, the Johnsons cut down their travel time — a lot. What used to take days, now became a 1½-hour flight, a time saver that Johnson's father, who worked with Lutheran Bible Translators, estimated took five years off his project. Aviation allowed him to finish his New Testament translation into the Kisi language before civil war forced the missionaries out of the West Coast African country.

"It's really a big benefit for the ministry because my father's work would never have gotten done," Johnson said.

With the role of mission aviators as important as ever, aviation ministries are discovering the need to build better communication in the field.

Johnson and John Armstrong, co-founders of Proclaim Aviation Ministries in Worthington, are in the middle of these changes. They are helping to establish an enhanced network of flight schools, ministries and mission organizations to spread the gospel of Christ throughout the world.

#### Identifying the need

Last year, a couple of the world's largest aviation mission organizations began noticing they had a lot of interested aviators who weren't making it into mission training programs.

Because of the remote nature of many overseas assignments, mission aviators need a great deal of experience. Also, most mission programs require missionaries to be free of debt in order that stewards see their financial support going directly into the mission field, not paying off unwise debt, Johnson said. However, flight school is expensive, and many pilots accumulate more than \$35,000 in educational debt.

Therefore, most pilots must choose whether to be a flight instructor and make little money or find a job and not get flight hours, Armstrong said. It could take many years after graduation for mission pilots to be ready to go abroad.

In January, mission organizations agreed they needed to create a program, or "finishing school," that could help graduates do both — a bridge program like Proclaim Aviation Ministries.

"Turned out they reinvented the wheel," Armstrong said. "Networking in the mission field is non-existent. They didn't even know we were out there."

Armstrong and Johnson founded Proclaim three years ago to help mission aviators. The program offers candidates flight and mechanical experience, helps pay off their student loans incurred during school and provides them with a living wage and housing, preparing them to join the mission field within one year. To date, Proclaim has helped two candidates transition into full-time ministry and provided advanced training to several others. It is a vital link between aviation schools and mission organizations.

Armstrong was invited to a meeting to discuss Proclaim's mission with several aviation organizations, including Mission Aviation Fellowship, Jungle Aviation and Radio Service, Mission Safety International and Moody Bible Institute. They created Vision Air's first board in March.

"There are a lot of good things happening in this community that just need to be pulled together," he said.

Due to the lack of communication, Armstrong said he's been unable to tell

churches what aviation ministry needs, resorting to the vague answer of planes, people and money. Now, the new networking will allow them to clarify and identify specific needs. Vision Air Board President Chuck Daly said the role of Vision Air centers on networking.

"(With Vision Air) I foresee a means of directing people with resources with people with the needs," said Daly, aviation director with Jungle Aviation.

#### Implementing their vision

Mission aviation ministries already have a field-wide association consisting of more than 50 mission organizations and schools dedicated to spreading the Gospel of Christ. Instead of investing in a new ministry, Vision Air's board decided to ask the members of the International Association of Missionary Aviation if they would consider including Vision Air in its mission. However, the additional focus would require the association to rework its structure and broaden its purpose statement.

In the past, the group was more like a "family reunion," where speakers encouraged each other and went their separate ways, Armstrong said. Now, the association would need to change its policies and bylaws.

Armstrong expected resistance at the annual May meeting in North Carolina, having written up pages of frequently-asked questions to counterattacks. But everyone agreed to the proposal.

"There was just this sense of certainty that we need to do this. In the Christian realm, we call it God-moving," Armstrong said.

The representatives elected Armstrong president of the international association, and he will help lead the board on its undertaking to implement Vision Air's strategies through literature, a Web site and a full-time traveling networker.

"We're excited to see God bringing unity among Christians in a way that has never happened before," said Daly, who has served as a pilot and mechanic overseas.

#### Training the next wave

Another big step for the association is to begin duplicating Proclaim's model throughout the country.

Armstrong and Johnson, who both attended Moody Bible Institute for mission aviation, own and operate Integrity Aviation Inc., located at the Worthington airport. Proclaim, a separate 501c3 non-profit entity, is supported financially by churches and individuals throughout the United States.

Proclaim is also undergoing new changes in its own program. Brian and Esther Writebol will arrive in July, and after a year of training, they will head to Botswana with Flying Mission.

As the U.S. home base for Flying Mission, Proclaim will be the sending agent for the Writebols. Proclaim is also expecting new candidates, Ross and Piper Charlton, who plan to serve with Mission Aviation Fellowship.

Mike McGregor will be Proclaim's first candidate to train at a partner location in North Carolina. He will gain experience as a flight instructor and mechanic with Compass21.

Mission aviation ministries began in the post-World War II era when organizations saw how useful airplanes could be in reaching isolated areas.

Aviators carry supplies to missionaries translating the Bible in remote areas throughout the world. They also offer humanitarian relief, "aiding people in the name of Christ," Armstrong said. While mission organizations have some established bases in central locations, some families are placed by themselves with only an airplane, so pilots need to be trained as mechanics.

As the International Association of Missionary Aviation restructures to include Vision Air, Armstrong uses the analogy of God organizing his special forces, explaining that this is a transitional stage for aviation ministries.

"This really is going to take better networking to establish, but that's the goal," he said.



BETH RICKERS/DAILY GLOBE

**Cameron Johnson (left) and John Armstrong, founders of Proclaim Aviation Ministries in Worthington, are helping to network aviation schools and mission organizations with bridge programs like Proclaim.**